



**COVID-19**

# Homeless System Response: Coordinated Investment Planning: How Houston is Leveraging Integrated Planning to Invest in COVID-19 Rehousing

Coordinated investment planning strategically aligns and commits resources from multiple sources to fund a community's rehousing strategy through a collaborative planning process. In Houston it is called the [Community-Wide COVID-19 Housing Program](#). The planning process was implemented by the Houston Continuum of Care (CoC) and demonstrates how targeting resources, scaling housing interventions, and leveraging relationships with both CoC member organizations and new partners can help communities maximize available resources and quickly rehouse those in shelter.

Houston leveraged an existing 5-year coordinated planning process to scale interventions with the new resources available through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Leadership for this process includes representatives from the city, county, housing developers, and community organizations who provide recommendations on resource allocation and coordinate needed partners. This approach integrates all available funding streams to secure housing for those at high risk of serious illness during COVID-19, with the goal of rehousing 5,000 households within two years.

Houston CoC staff drew on lessons learned from [Housing for Harvey](#), a rehousing surge effort in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, and their five-year coordinated strategic planning process to build out their COVID-19 rehousing goals. During Housing for Harvey, CoC staff realized that as they pulled in homeless-sector partners, ongoing services for people experiencing homelessness began to slow. Staff came on to the rehousing project but were not replaced to maintain standard intake services. For this reason and to respond to COVID-19, the CoC focused on developing relationships with anti-poverty nonprofits (rather than homeless sector-specific organizations) that could act nimbly and move funds through the system quickly. With this infrastructure, the CoC drew on knowledge about existing system gaps and priority populations from their strategic plan to develop three rehousing lanes:

- **Rapid Rehousing (RRH):** Serve 1,700 households newly experiencing homelessness who do not require intensive case management.
- **Bridge to Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH):** Create a bridge to PSH RRH program so households are housed while they are on the PSH waitlist. This is necessary because the existing PSH inventory of about 5,000 units is slow to turn over. Additionally, Houston has several clients who are not currently eligible for PSH but have medical or mental health considerations that may become more severe and reach disability status in the near future without immediate housing and support services.
- **Diversion:** Target those at the front door of the homeless system to reduce inflow. The goal is to divert 2,000 households from homelessness by providing a three-month rent subsidy.

In addition to these lanes, Houston is also investing in increased outreach services to those living outside of the urban core, additional homeless prevention services (including for those in PSH unable to pay their share of rent), offering mental health case management to help stabilize high-risk households, and maintain COVID-19 emergency shelters.

## Building Partnerships

Houston CoC staff focused on partnering with the CoC member organizations that had the capacity to continue traditional services and participate in a coordinated rehousing effort. They conducted thoughtful outreach—being upfront about the time commitment and staffing resources necessary to partner—and encouraged interested organizations with additional bandwidth to be rehousing partners. Based on this outreach, seven homeless-serving organizations joined with the Houston CoC and will apply to a Request for Information (RFI) for use of CARES Act funds.

Outreach and partnership also extended to all area organizations and community members, including local anti-poverty organizations that were not necessarily homeless specific, as they could move funds faster than a

government agency. As of early June, Houston CoC has held online forums that were attended by over 183 diverse organizations for potential partnership, awareness-building, and stakeholder feedback on their coordinated investment plan.

In addition to including community groups and nonprofits, government agencies also have input in the partnership. Both city and county officials have provided support to the rehousing effort, as well as the Houston Housing Authority, who received approximately \$11 million in Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. These commitments were essential to bringing in additional philanthropy dollars.

## Securing Funding

To start the coordinated investment planning process, the Houston CoC first determined how much funding they had to invest in the plan, and asked the city and county to match their investment rather than asking for seed funding from general funds and plugging remaining holes with homeless sector funds. This encouraged CoC staff and partners to think creatively about how to strategically combine funding streams to meet their rehousing goals. The first challenge they faced was an ongoing housing voucher program freeze. The second is that the CoC generally does not receive general funds from the city or county and had to coordinate with officials to open up those funds as flexible funding sources for their rehousing plan.

CoC and local government staff first focused on maximizing use of the new resources available through the CARES Act. Through their partnership with the housing authority, they were able to access new CDBG dollars. They planned on leveraging additional RRH funds, including CARES Act Emergency Solutions Grants (ESG-CV) and additional CDBG funds from the CARES Act to put toward their bridge to PSH rehousing lane. They also investigated unspent state and local ESG funds that may still be available to increase their overall budget. Finally, staff explored ways to leverage Coronavirus Relief Funds that must be spent by December for expenses that are not eligible under existing HUD programs.

Much of this rehousing plan relies on market rate housing in the Houston area. In the Housing for Harvey effort, the homeless sector conducted significant outreach with area landlords to secure large numbers of individual units. The CoC plans to leverage this experience and recruit landlords to join in their COVID-19 rehousing effort. In addition to this outreach, the CoC has also explored the option of master leasing multiple units; landlords have been receptive to this idea.

## Developing Messaging and Outreach

In speaking with the City, County, and private landlords, the CoC has emphasized the impact of community partnerships. They have consistently messaged both COVID-19 and homelessness as public health issues, demonstrating the lower cost of housing compared to continued support of isolation and quarantine in a non-congregate shelter environment. Staff have focused messaging to partners and the community on prioritizing those experiencing literal homelessness in this effort to secure funding. They have tried to reach decision-makers such as high-level staff for elected officials, directors, and judges.

The Houston CoC leveraged their existing planning process, which illustrated system gaps and high-priority populations, to quickly scale a plan to rehouse 5,000 people in two years. This process relies on community partnerships, city and county government investment, and the CoC acting as backbone project management organization for feedback and landlord engagement. Rightsizing workgroups, maintaining ongoing homeless sector operations, and consistent messaging has been key to quickly moving this plan into implementation.